

Some names are never truly forgotten...

THE ECHO OF HER NAME



by B I S M A

DEDICATION:

“For those who taught me that silence has its own language, and secrets their own weight.”

“To the ones who believed in my words before I did.”

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Introduction

There are stories people tell to remember.

And then there are stories that they tell to forget.

This is neither.

The Echo of Her Name was born in the space between truth and terror,

A place where the memories rot slowly, like abandoned rooms
swallowed by dust.

And every silence hides a secret as sharp as a cut.

No one speaks of her anymore.

Not because they don't remember,

but because remembering is dangerous.

Her name was once a gentle thing.

Soft. Fragile.

A name meant to be spoken in warm light and under safe skies.

But somewhere along the line—when the doors were closed

after the letters stopped coming, after the night she didn't return—her
name became something else.

Something colder.

Something that still reverberates long after you think the sound has
faded.

Isn't it strange how a person can disappear? and yet their absence
takes up far more space than their presence did.

It is in the hallways,

In half-finished conversations,

In the weight of the question nobody wants answered.

People won't pay attention to the echo.

But you will.

Eventually, you will.

This book is not a puzzle to be solved;

It is a trail of bruised memories,

Broken timelines,

And a truth that watches you even when you look away.

What happened to her is not the beginning.

It is the consequence.

It begins far, far deeper—

In the quiet cruelty of ordinary days,

In the small choices that felt harmless at the time.

In a kind of love that becomes a curse

when held too tightly.

And as you turn each page,

You will feel the walls closing in— not because the story traps you, but because it reflects parts of yourself. You've been trying to outrun. There's a reason people are afraid of echoes. They say an echo only returns when something is still waiting. She is still waiting. And by the time you reach the end, you will understand why her name refused to stay buried.

Chapter 1 “The Sound”

The voice came at 6:07 pm not a second earlier or later. Ivy Halston

She stood on the edge of the cliff, the wind curling around her like a memory, when the sound threaded through the sea air: soft, cracked, and unmistakably hers.

‘Ivy.’

Just her name. Whispered from nowhere. Or everywhere.

She froze; her breath caught in her throat. The town below had fallen into its usual hush, the sort that made you hear things that weren’t really there.

But this didn't feel like a trick of the wind. The voice was too close. Too deliberate.

Slowly, she turned her head, scanning the jagged ridgeline and the thundering ocean below. No one. No footprints but her own in the soft dirt path leading back to the house.

“Get a grip”, she muttered, rubbing her arms through the wool of her oversized sweater.

It had been three days since she’d returned to Marrow Bay. Three days since she'd left behind the cluttered apartment, the ex-fiancé who kept asking for closure, with the city noises drowning her thoughts.

Now, all she had were thoughts. Thoughts and silence.

Her father’s house—little more like a forgotten cottage—waited a few hundred feet back from the cliffside. She'd come to check in on him, make sure the nurse was showing up and maybe-just maybe-feel

Something again.

But instead, she'd found this: isolation, fog, and a whispering wind that apparently knew her name. As she turned to head back, she saw movement out of the corner of her eye. A figure. Not close—just a blur, near the base of the abandoned lighthouse.

Somebody was standing there. Watching.

Ivy blinked, squinting against the dimming light. The figure didn't move. Then it slowly raised one hand in a lazy wave.

She hesitated. Waved back, tentatively. The figure turned and disappeared behind the rock wall.

Nope.

She walked briskly back toward the house, the sound of her boots

scraping the gravel path louder than the waves. She didn't like being watched. Not after everything. "You're imagining things", she said aloud, though her heart wasn't convinced.

As she reached the porch, her phone buzzed in her jacket pocket. One new voice message.

From a blocked number.

Ivy frowned. Pressed play.

Static. Then

"Ivy"

She almost dropped the phone.

Same voice. Same word. Whispered directly into her ear.

But the message had a timestamp. 6:07 pm. Ivy didn't sleep that night. The voice message in her head played on repeat, weaving itself into her dreamed until she couldn't distinguish between the real and what her mind had created and invented. Every creak of the old house felt louder. Every gust of wind sounded like a whisper.

When the first light pushed through the clouds the next morning, she got dressed and made coffee on muscle memory. No appetite, no real plan.

Just a buzzing need to do something.

She walked back to the cliff.

This time, she brought her phone, a field notebook she used for editing notes, and a half-formed intention to prove to herself that it was nothing-just atmospheric acoustics, stress, the crumbling edges of burnout.

The wind was calmer today, the ocean gentler. But the cliffs still loomed, jagged and solemn, as if holding some secret they'd never share.

Ivy stood in the same spot. Checked the time. 6:04 a.m.

Too early. Yet she waited, all the same.

“Come on, ghost ,”she muttered. “Let’s get this over with.”

A voice spoke behind her. “You’re early.”

She startled, spinning to face the man standing a few feet away. He was barefoot on the grass in dark jeans and a linen shirt that looked as if it belonged to someone from a century ago, and his hair was longish- wind-swept. His eyes, sharp and dark, studied her as if he already knew her.

“Sorry,” he said, not sounding sorry at all. “Didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Thought you might come back.”

Ivy blinked, heart thudding. “Were you watching me last night?”

“Watching?”

He tilted his head. “No. Listening.”

“That wasn’t better”.

“Okay,” she said slowly, backing a step.

“And who exactly are you?”

“Silas”, he said, like it should mean something.

“I live in the lighthouse.”

“Nobody lives in the lighthouse.”

“Not officially.”

He gave her a small smile.

“The town says it’s condemned. They haven’t looked inside.”

Ivy took another step back. He didn't move, just studied her. Calm. Controlled.

“You heard it too,” he said. “Didn’t you?”

She didn't respond.

“The voice,” Silas said, softer. “It called your name. Around six. Maybe a minute after. Same as always.”

Her hands clenched into fists at her sides. “Who told you that?”

“No one. I heard it.”

Ivy stared. Something in his face—some tightness around the eyes—told her he wasn’t playing a trick.

“It’s happened before”, he said, more to the air than to her.

“Always someone new. Always the cliffs. Always a name.”

She swallowed. “You’re telling me there’s a—what? A ghost on a timer?”

“No. Not a ghost. A recording.”

“From where?”

He shrugged. “That’s what I’m trying to find out.”

Ivy crossed her arms over her chest. “Look, I don’t know who you are, but—.”

“You got a message last night,” he interrupted. “Didn’t you? Blocked number?”

Her stomach dropped.

Silas nodded like he’d just confirmed a theory. “They always come after the first echo.”

“Who’s they?”

“Not who. What.” He stepped closer, gently, like approaching a skittish animal. “I’ve been collecting them. Echoes.

Recordings. Fragments. They’re pieces of something old.

Something this place doesn’t want forgotten.”

Ivy took a breath, and it came out unsteady. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because this time, it said your name. And that means you’re part of it.”

Now.

She didn't know what to say.

“I'll show you,” he said. “If you want.”

Ivy looked past him, toward the lighthouse, now barely visible through the morning mist. The same lighthouse she used to ride past as a kid on her bike, the one her father called cursed.

“Not today,” she said.

Silas nodded. “But soon.”

He turned and walked away, barefoot, vanishing into the mist as quietly as he'd appeared.

Ivy remained still for some time, expecting the mention of her name.

This time, the wind said nothing.

Chapter 2 “The Stranger”

Ivy hadn't realized how quiet her life had become until the silence started talking back. The cliffs had always been loud—the wind, the sea, the crunch of gravel underfoot—but none of that compared to the sound that lived in her now: a voice she'd never wanted to hear, and a stranger said it belonged to the past.

It remembers. Her father's Words echoed in her mind as she moved around the small kitchen, the kettle boiling, the house creaking around her like a living thing exhaling. The walls seemed thinner than she remembered, or maybe she had simply forgotten how to listen.

She kept glancing at the clock, willing it to speed toward 6:07 p.m.—the exact time the mysterious voicemail had arrived, the moment when the; Echo whispered her name. She was still hours away from that moment, and yet the weight of it pressed on her chest like a secret begging to be exposed.

The following morning, wrapped in a thick coat and clutching her recorder, Ivy made her way back to the lighthouse. The fog lay heavy and low, curling around her boots and the rocks like a shroud. The lighthouse loomed tall and weathered, a stubborn sentinel against the sea and the years.

Silas was there, as if waiting, brush in hand and canvas resting against the jagged cliffs. “You came”, he said softly, eyes tired but steady.

“I need to hear the echo again”, Ivy said, her voice little more than the sound of the crashing waves. Silas nodded with no surprise.

“It’s never quite the same twice.”

As the door to the lighthouse swung open, the familiar scent of linseed oil, damp wood, and salt. Inside, narrow stairs spiralled upward flanked by shelves cluttered with analogue tape recorders, stacks of magnetic reels, and worn books about sound waves and forgotten science. It felt like a shrine to memories trapped in time.

As Ivy’s eyes adjusted to the dim light, she noticed a black-and-white photograph pinned to the wall near a reel-to-reel machine. Two children froze in the grainy image: a young girl with a long braid, and a smaller child missing one shoe, standing precariously close to the cliff’s sledge. “Who are they?” Ivy asked, stepping closer.

Silas hesitated, then responded, “That’s Elena—my sister. And the other. I think that’s you.”

Ivy's heart skipped. She didn't remember this photo, didn't remember Elena whatsoever. “That can’t be me,” she muttered, tracing the outline of the smaller child.

Silas shrugged. “The cliffs remember more than people do.”

On the back of the photo, in faded blue ink, someone had scrawled: 06-07

“Bring it home”. The handwriting was almost childlike, but the meaning was clear. The date, 6:07—the same time as the voicemail. And a cryptic message she couldn't yet decipher.

Ivy carefully folded up the photo and tucked it into her coat pocket. The idea that this strange place held memories she didn’t possess was unsettling her, but also sparked a flicker of determination. Somewhere beneath the openly through layers

of time and silence was the truth waiting for her to find. That night, back in her father's quiet cottage, Ivy sat on the edge of herbed, the photograph pressed between her fingers. The image of the braid, the missing shoe, the cliffs - pieces of a puzzle she'd never been allowed to see before.

She didn't remember being that small girl standing on the edge of the world. But deep inside, behind the fog of forgotten years, something stirred-not quite a memory, but a weight, like a door long sealed, now slightly ajar.

Outside, the wind whispered again, carrying voices that might have been warnings of what was yet to come-or the past.

The picture in her pocket burned against her thigh as Ivy walked, back through the mist to her father's cottage. Her mind refused to settle, spinning around the image of the two children on the cliff—the girl with the braid, the smaller child missing a shoe—and the cryptic note: 06-07.

Bring it home. What did it mean? And why had she never seen this? photo before? Why didn't she remember Elena at all?

A hollow ache spread through her chest. It wasn't just curiosity, anymore. It was something heavier, a weight pressing on her ribs, demanding she remember what she tried so hard to forget. Ivy felt like a stranger in her own past, a visitor barred from a room she once knew intimately, yet was locked away.

What secrets had been buried with Elena? And why did the cliffs seem to hold those secrets tight, like a lover refusing to let go?

Her father's words echoed again in her mind—"Don't listen too long. It remembers." The pronoun stuck with her. It. "Was the—it the cliffs? The wind? Or something darker, something alive in the echoes themselves?"

Ivy wanted to believe it was nothing more than sound bouncing off stone, but something deep inside whispered otherwise. That voice on the voicemail—so fragile, yet unmistakably real—made a thread that pulled her through the fog of years and silence.

She thought about the night Elena disappeared. She thought about the missing shoe. Had she been there? Seen something? The possibility it unnerved her so much that she tried to push it away, and yet it clung to her, slipping into her dreams and waking thoughts alike.

Sitting alone in her childhood room, Ivy traced the edges of the photo. with trembling fingers. The past wasn't just a place she could visit, it was a living, breathing thing that had never stopped waiting. And now it was waking up.

Who am I if I don't remember? she wondered. What part of myself did I lose in the shadows of this town?

The windowpane rattled with the wind, as if answering. A whisper just beyond hearing, a call she couldn't ignore. She wrapped her coat tightly around her. Tomorrow, she promised, she would climb up to the attic. She would search through boxes her father had left untouched for years. Somewhere in that clutter, she hoped to find more than just forgotten photographs. She hoped to uncover part of the truth that would set her free.

But even as she made that promise, Ivy felt the slow tightening of something dangerous—a fear that the truth might not be what she wanted to hear. Because some memories, when dug up, refuse to be forgotten again. And some echoes never fade.

Chapter 3 “Old Echoes”

The attic door slammed shut behind Ivy, echoing through the silent space like a warning. She stood, frozen for a moment, the cold, stale air wrapping around her like a shroud. In her hands was the crayon drawing she had found—rough but unmistakable—a girl with a braid standing on the cliff’s edge, one shoe missing.

The edges of the paper dug into her palm, and suddenly memories that were long buried started clawing their way to the surface.

She was no longer just in the attic; in her mind, she was a barefoot child running wild along the cliffs, laughter chasing the salty wind. Beside her was Elena—the same girl in the photo—with hair braided and fluttering like a banner. They splashed through tide pools and chased seagulls, carefree and wild.

Ivy yelled out, “Wait up!” but suddenly halted, realising that one of her shoes had vanished into the wet grass.

Elena laughed softly. “You always lose your shoes,” she teased.

Then, the sharp crack boomed through the cliffs, silencing everything.

Elena's smile faltered, and she stepped dangerously close to the edge, whispering, “They’re coming for me.” Ivy reached out, but the world blurred, the memory disappeared into the air.

Her mouth full of dust, Ivy swallowed hard, threatening tears.

What had she forgotten? What had her young mind been trying so desperately hard to protect? She pressed the old cassette tape into the recorder Silas had given her and hit play. Static filled the room, then a fragile whisper reached her ears: “Help me...”

It was her voice—her own, younger voice calling from the past. The papers scattered on the floor stirred with the cold draft; the window rattled as if the it seemed as though the cliffs themselves were speaking. A whisper floated in the air: “Don’t listen too long. It remembers.” Then the tape clicked off.

Startled, Ivy reached to press play again, but the tape was gone. Shaken, she left the attic and walked toward the lighthouse, hope and She felt fear twisting inside her. Silas stood by his easel, paintbrush hovering mid-air, staring at the restless sea.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” he said quietly.

Ivy held up the drawing. “I found this in the attic. It’s me. and Elena.”

Silas's eyes darkened with old wounds. “You were closer to her than you remember. Closer than you wanted to be.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Ivy asked, voice shaking. “Why hide all of this?”

Silas sighed, his fingers tightening around the brush. “Because some truths are too heavy for a child. Because the cliffs don’t just remember— they hold on, and they never forgive.”

Her voice cracked. “I hear the voice on the tape, see the signs. I can’t ignore it anymore.”

He nodded slowly, eyes fixed on the waves below. “Then you have to face the echoes that haunt this place. They want something. Something you’re a part of”.

The sky darkened, and the wind tugged at the lighthouse curtains like a warning.

Ivy’s throat tightened. “What happened to Elena? To you?”

Silas’s jaw clenched. “Years ago, in a storm like this, I was with Elena.”

The rain fell hard, lightning tearing the sky. She looked out over the cliffs, eyes empty. “They’re coming for me,” she whispered. “Then she slipped. I tried to catch her, but the sea took her before I could.”

He swallowed, haunted. “That scream never left me. It changed everything.”

Ivy’s eyes welled up with tears. “Why keep me from the truth?”

“Because the echoes don’t just haunt the cliffs—they haunt us. I wanted so that it doesn’t hurt you.”

She met his gaze. “But I’m already caught in it.”

He nodded. “Then you’ll have to follow the echoes, wherever they lead. But be warned—some truths come with a price.”

Silas face grew distant as he pulled out another memory—sitting beside the fire as a child, his father’s voice low and urgent. “Never listen too long,” his father warned. “The cliffs remember more than they should. They keep the echoes alive, and sometimes they take more than you can give.”

Back in the lighthouse, Ivy swallowed hard. “What do we do now?”

“We follow the echoes,” Silas said, voice steady but sober.

“And hope they don’t claim us too.”

That night, with only the flickering fire for company, Ivy pressed play on the tape-recorder one last time.

The whisper came again, soft and urgent: “Help me...”

Outside, the wind carried back a voice—a voice from the cliffs, chilling. clear and unmistakable. “You can’t hide from what remembers.”

Chapter 4 “The Experiment”

She stood at the edge of the cliff, wind tugging at her hair; her heart was pounding in her chest. Beneath her the sea churned restlessly, a reflection of turmoil within her. She had returned to the place where Elena had vanished, looking for answers, seeking closure.

But all she found was silence.

"You're back," a voice called from behind her.

Ivy whirled, startled. Silas stood a few paces away, his expression unreadable.

"I had to," Ivy replied, her voice barely above a whisper. "I need to".

The goal here is to make participants understand what happened. Silas stepped nearer, his eyes fixed on the horizon. "Some things are better left unknown."

"But I can't move on without knowing," Ivy insisted. "I need to know the TRUTH."

He met her gaze, his eyes fierce. "The truth isn't always what we expect. Sometimes it's more terrifying."

Ivy swallowed hard, her throat dry. "What do you mean?"

Silas was hesitant, then spoke in a low tone, "Elena didn't just disappear. She was part of something. an experiment."

Ivy's mind was racing while trying to process his words. "An experiment? What kind of experiment?"

Silas looked away, his jaw clenched. "A dangerous one. One that tampered with the very fabric of reality."

Before Ivy could say anything, a loud crack resounded across the air, followed by a flash of blinding light. She recoiled, protecting her eyes.

When the light faded, Silas was gone.

"Silas!" Ivy screamed, but the wind swept her voice away.

She searched frantically, her eyes scanning the cliffside, but there was No sign of him. Panic surged through her.

The voice echoed again in the darkness. "You're too late."

Ivy's chest constricted. The door had slammed shut, and the lighthouse. The interior was suffocatingly quiet. No wind. No footsteps. Just her breath-and that voice. It wasn't Silas. It wasn't Elena.

It was something else. "Who's there?" Ivy called out, her voice un-steady but defiant.

Silence.

As her eyes adjusted to the dim glow leaking in through the cracked window, and she backed toward the beam of light, gripping the journal like a lifeline.

"I just want the truth," she said, louder now.

"I'm not leaving without it."

Then, a flicker. A figure in the shadows-lean, still, watching.

Ivy's voice cracked. "Silas?"

The figure stepped forward.

Not Silas.

It was a man in a long coat; his face obscured by a brimmed hat. Something

The hairs on Ivy's neck stood up as he did, and the way he didn't move quite right. The way his silence felt... unnatural.

He halted a few feet away and cocked his head. "You're the girl," he said finally, voice hoarse, like stone scraping stone. "The one who came back.", "Ivy," she whispered.

"I lived here. I knew Elena."

The man's lips curled into a strange, joyless smile. "They all knew Elena. That was the problem."

She tightened her grip on the journal. "What do you mean? What was the experiment?"

He raised his hand, pointing to the pages scattered at her feet. "It started with memory. They thought: if they can somehow isolate trauma, it could control it. Erase it. Rewrite it. But something went wrong."

Ivy knelt quickly, flipping through the journal. Pages detailed sessions— experiments done not only on volunteers but also on children.

Elena's

The name appeared repeatedly, circled in red ink. The margins were filled with frantic scrawling: Too unstable. Repeating phrases. Identical dreams. Echoes growing. Location holds memory physically.

"I don't understand," Ivy said, her breathing quickening. "Why would anyone do this to kids?"

“They thought they could cure grief,” the man replied. “But instead, they fed it.”

Suddenly the journal’s pages shifted in her hands. One fell free—a photograph. Ivy froze.

It was a picture of her.

Bound to a chair.

Eyes closed, wires attached to her temples.

A date scrawled across the back: 06-07.

She stumbled back. “No. No, this can’t be real. I don’t remember this.”

“Exactly,” the man said quietly.

She backed toward the stairs, heart pounding. “Who are you?”

He took one slow step towards her. “I was the one who turned the machine off.”

And with that, the light at the lighthouse above suddenly blinked on—flooding the space in a sharp white glow. She blinked, and the man was gone.

Ivy sat on her childhood bed, knees pulled up to her chest. The journal lay open beside her, along with the photo. The power was back on, but the warmth had not. Everything inside the house was colder, as if it were holding its breath.

She picked up her phone, called Silas again. Straight to voicemail. “Where are you?”, she whispered.

She scanned another entry in the journal. Elena’s last recorded session—

June 7th.

The same date on the reverse of the photo:

The session abruptly ended.

It simply read: Subject vanished. No trace.

The knock at the front door jolted her upright.

She crept downstairs, the old wood groaning beneath her steps. The Knock came again—three slow, deliberate taps.

She opened the door.

No one was there.

Only a small cassette, wrapped in black cloth, lying on the porch. She took it inside, put it on the table, staring at it as if it might move. Then she slowly inserted it into the recorder.

At first static.

Then. her voice again.

But this time, it wasn't a child's voice.

It was her voice now.

“Sobbing. —No one is listening. No one remembers. Please, Ivy. Please come back, before it finds me.”

She stumbled backward.

That was me. The voice wasn't from the past.

It was from the future.

As Ivy stared at the recorder, the window behind her shattered inward. with a violent gust. The fire went out.

And a new voice whispered, clear and cold: “She was never the first. You won't be the last

Chapter 5 “Ghost Frequencies”

Glass crackled under Ivy’s shoes as she backed away from the shattered window. Cold air roared into the room like a scream that had finally found its voice.

The cassette recorder on the table hissed, rewound itself with a mechanical whine, then clicked back into place. The voice that followed didn’t belong to her. “She was never the first. You won’t be the last.”

It was male, calm, measured, disturbingly familiar. She froze , she stared at the recorder as if it might answer her questions, but silence. returned. The fire was out. Her breath misted in the air. For the first time since she had arrived, Ivy felt truly afraid-not of memories, not of ghosts, but of the very real possibility that she was

Being hunted. Not just haunted.

She did not wait for another omen. She took her coat and the journal, pocketed the photo and ran off into the night.

The lighthouse stood like a skeletal sentinel over the coastline. Ivy half-jogged up the winding cliff path, heart pounding, eyes scanning the shadows. When she reached the top, the door to the keeper’s quarters was ajar, with the frame splintered as though it had been forced open.

Inside, chaos. The canvas Silas had been painting was slashed through.

His books and the notes were scattered across the floor, overturned like someone—or something had been searching for something very specific. “Silas?” Ivy called out, but her voice felt swallowed by the walls.

She stepped deeper into the room. It was then she noticed the blood. Just a smear—barely visible—on the edge of the table, trailing toward the cellar door beneath the stairs. Ivy's gut twisted.

She went down into the cellar slowly, where stone walls swallowed light, and breath. Every groan of the stairs was amplified, it seemed, over the one preceding it. “Silas?”, she whispered again, softer this time, almost fearful of being heard.

The cellar was empty, at first. But then she saw it: a small radio transceiver, covered in dust, blinking faintly. Its signal meter spiked in erratic pulses, though nothing was transmitting.

Beside it, a notebook; pages filled with wave diagrams, and fragmented notes:

Echoes respond to emotional memory.

The cliffs are a frequency chamber.

Not all of them are dead.

Then a line scribbled in red ink: “There’s something in the signal that’s listening back.”

A sudden click. The radio sputtered to life. “Ivy...”

She leaned in. “Silas?”

“Don’t—trust—it!”

The voice broke into static.

“Silas! Where are you?”

The voice came back, fragmented. “Below. Not—alone. Don’t follow—unless—ready”.

The signal died completely.

Ivy's hands were trembling. If Silas was alive, he was trying to help. But what was "it" the thing he warned her about? The experiment gone wrong?

She went back upstairs and sifted through the mess. Behind a panel in the wall, she found a dusty box hidden amongst loose boards labelled:

Project Halcyon – Echo Hbst Data (Phase II)

She opened it.

Inside were rows of audio tapes, all dated between 1998 and 2001. Many bore a single word: “Unresolved.”

She pulled one at random, inserted it into the backup recorder on the desk, and pressed play.

Static.

Then:

A child's voice-Elena's. “I don't want to go back. It watches me in the mirrors. It wears Daddy's face sometimes. It says it came through the wires...”

Ivy pressed pause, heart slamming in her chest.

Came through the wires.

“The —experiment” wasn’t just about trauma—it was about transmission.

Memory as a broadcast. A frequency.

And somehow, something had come back with it.

Outside, the wind howled louder. Ivy stepped onto the balcony and looked toward the sea.

That's when she saw it.

A figure, walking along the base of the cliff--barefoot, long hair trailing behind her, white dress soaked by the surf.

“Elena?” Ivy whispered.

But the girl didn't turn. She just walked towards a dark inlet carved into the cliff face-one Ivy didn't remember ever being there.

A secret passageway? Ivy ran.

The beach was wet and dark, the sky a canvas of deep bruise purple. The tide hissed in protest as she approached the inlet. It wasn't a cave-it was a man-made tunnel, half-collapsed, with rusted railings and remnants of an old track. A forgotten service line, perhaps from when the lighthouse still used a supply rail.

Ivy ducked inside, her flashlight cutting through the darkness.

The tunnel went down. Deep. Too deep. She followed, her steps careful until the air changed-colder, damper, humming with a low vibration she felt in her teeth.

Then came the door.

Steel. Old. Marked with the words:

HALCYONLAB3C - RESTRICTED

It was ajar. She stepped through.

The hall beyond was lined with ancient fluorescent lights, most flickering or dead. A layer of dust coated everything - monitors, filing cabinets, broken lab tables. Yet the deeper she went the less abandoned it felt.

One monitor was on.

It displayed static... until Ivy approached.

Then it changed.

Live Feed Room 7B

The image steadied.

A room. Bare. Stone floor. Centre - Silas, bound to a chair, head slumped forward. His chest moved—barely.

Then, a shape moved in the corner of the screen. Ivy leaned in closer. At first, she thought it was a person.

Then it turned its head.

Its face was hers.

Not a reflection, not a double.

Something that wore her face like a borrowed mask.

Before Ivy could move, a speaker crackled above her. The same the distorted male voice returned. “We found you. She remembers. Now you're part of the signal too.” Then: “Room 7B is ready for the second experiment.” And the hallway lights began shutting off. One by one. Coming closer.

Chapter 6 “Family Ties”

The keen scent of pine was overlayed in the night air with something else-, something older, fainter, like the pages of a burned book or the smoky breath of the past. Elara stood at the edge of the driveway, staring at the dimly lit house she hadn't seen in over a decade. The windows glowed like tired eyes.

Her grip tightened on the letter that she'd found tucked into her late mother's music box, which ended with just three words: “Find your uncle.”

Only... she didn't have an uncle. At least, not one anyone had ever spoken of. As her boots crunched against gravel, the house loomed closer, its Silence-almost deliberate. Elara could feel it watching.

The door opened before she knocked.

A tall man stood there, grey at the temples, eyes a precise match to hers. “You shouldn't have come,” he said quietly.

“I didn't know you existed,” Elara replied.

He looked past her, as if expecting someone else. “And yet here you are.”

The man introduced himself as Silas. No last name. Just Silas. The house was cluttered with books, half-dismantled clocks, and framed photographs—every one of them turned face down.

“Bad luck to stare at the dead too long,” Silas muttered when she asked. He made her tea in silence. The kettle screamed

once—long and shrill— before cutting off mid-whistle as if something had gagged it. They sat opposite each other at a narrow table. One fly was buzzing between them, relentless. “Who were you to my mother?” Elara asked.

He didn't answer at first. He stared at the steam curling up from his mug, eyes distant. “We were born into the same house. That’s all I’ll say for now.”

“That letter—she told me to find you. She wanted me to know something.” “I’m sure she did.” He leaned forward. “But the thing about secrets, Elara, is they rot the longer you keep them. And your mother. she kept a great many.”

Later that night Elara wandered the hall upstairs. The creak of the old floorboards sounded wrong—off-tempo. She paused by a door that hadn't been there earlier. It was narrow, painted in black lacquer and bore no handle.

Whispers tickled her ear as she leaned in. “Elara.”

She snapped back. There was no one behind her. Downstairs, Silas was playing something on a dusty old record player. A woman's voice sang low and mournful. The same melody her mother used to hum when she thought Elara wasn't listening. She opened the door to her childhood bedroom, now preserved like a shrine. Her stuffed animals were still arranged neatly, untouched. But there, on the pillow, was something new—a folded scrap of parchment.

In delicate, looping script: ~~He knows~~ **But he's not the only one who remembers**

Check the portrait. Her skin prickled. What portrait?

The only one she'd seen was a faded oil painting in the hallway—tall woman in an emerald gown, standing beside a fireplace. No name, no date.

Elara ran back to it. Something was in the hand of the woman in the portrait, barely visible tucked into the folds of her dress. Elara peered closer. It was a key. And along the bottom edge of the frame, lightly incised into the wood, were Numbers: 1127. A date? A code? “Looking for something?”

She jumped. Silas stood behind her. “I—uh—the painting. Who is she?”

He didn't look at the portrait. “She's the reason you're here.”

Silas finally cracked after midnight. A bottle of whiskey sat between them. Half-empty. “Elara, do you know what your mother did to keep you safe?”

“I know she ran.”

“From what”, “I don'--”

“From him,” he said, voice low. “From the one who started all of this. The name that must not be spoken in this house.”

“Then why did she send me here?”

Silas looked to the black-lacquered door. “Because you're the only one who can open that door. And the only one left who can end what she started.”

The next morning, Silas was gone. No note, no trace. But the door was ajar. The air inside smelled of stale smoke and jasmine, and there was newspaper clippings pinned to the walls—obituaries, missing person.

The cases ranged from articles about bizarre disappearances back to the 1940s. One article was circled in red:

“Local Pianist Vanishes on Wedding Night. Groom Claims She Walked into a Mirror.”

Elara's fingers trembled as she flipped the clipping over. More writing. He returns every thirty years. He takes what was promised. The song keeps him away. Never stop the song. The song finished; downstairs, the record player clicked.

And silence fell like a hammer.

The moment the song ended, the house exhaled.

Not a breeze. Not a creak. A breath-hot and sour-like something exiled had just woken. Downstairs, Elara bolted, her heart thudding in her ears. The record spun in silence, needle scraping gently. Then: a whisper, so faint she thought she imagined it.

“Don’t stop the song.”

But it hadn't come from the record. It came from the mirror across the room. She approached it warily. There was a faint shimmer in the glass, like a ripple in time. Her reflection blinked out of sync—just for a second—but enough to make her stumble backward.

That mirror didn't just reflect.

It watched.

She returned to the room behind the black door.

Clippings. Notes. Photographs of people she didn’t recognize—yet felt she should. Their eyes, like hers. Their hands, delicate, long-fingered always holding something: a

pendant, a folded page, a feather. The old piano stood in the middle of the room, its ivory keys yellowed and cracked. Dust blanketed it, except for one place—middle C—clean, as though someone had played it yesterday.

When she pressed the key, the sound was wrong. Too low. Warped. It was a hollow inside the piano. She lifted the lid, and there it was. A journal bound in green leather, sealed shut by wire. A brass key hung on a chain around it.

But the initials weren't hers. Or her mother's.

They read: I.W.

Iris Wolfe

A name she'd seen once before—on a hospital intake form in her mother's effects. The line for "emergency contact" had been crossed out, with one word scrawled beside it in red ink:

"Deceased."

She unlocked the journal.

The first entry was dated 1945.

March 3, 1945

He came again last night, the man with no shadow. He spoke through before the mirror, same words as always: "Where is the girl?"

I burned the music. But it won't stop playing in my dreams.

The house remembers her.

Another entry.

June 18, 1949

The bloodline's thinning. It skips every third girl now. Elenora knew this. That's why she took the child. She thought she could hide her. But the song always calls them back.

Elara's breath caught.

Elenora—her mother's middle name. No one ever used it.

She flipped further.

December 12, 1966

I saw her again today. The girl with Elenora's eyes. She doesn't know

What she is. But he does. And he's patient.

Elara closed the journal.

The silence in the house was wrong now-denser, crowded, as if walls leaned in to listen.

She turned—and gasped.

A tall woman stood in the doorway: gaunt, dressed in green. Her eyes. were not eyes. Just pits of smoke.

She raised a hand. “No,” Elara whispered. “No, you're not”

The woman smiled.

Then disappeared.

She ran.

Out the black door. Down the stairs. Out into the night.

The cold slapped her. The woods loomed ahead-closer than before.

That wasn't possible.

She turned back to the house.

The lights were all off now.

But one room glowed faintly red. The attic.

And in the window, a silhouette: a figure in a long coat.

Watching her.

Then, music—a new melody, not from the record.

From the woods.

It was the same song her mother hummed. But slower now.

Twisted.

Played backwards.

Elara lurched forward, pulled by the trees.

Something was waiting. She knew it. Not a man. Not a ghost.

Something older, bound to her blood.

A clearing opened up.

In the middle, an arch of stone overgrown with moss, and a mirror hanging between its columns.

The mirror shimmered.

Her reflection stepped forward—

—and whispered, “You’re too late. He already knows you’re here.”

Behind her the branches creaked. She turned. Footsteps. Slow. Measured. And then a voice—deep, male, close. “You should never have stopped the song.”

Chapter 7 “The Tape”

The woods whispered behind her.

Pounding against her ribs like a thing trapped. The mirror in the stone arch had gone dark—just black glass now, reflecting nothing but the void.

But the voice still echoed. “You should never have stopped the song.”

She spun around, fists clenched. “Who’s there?”

No answer.

Only a soft rustling of branches, a snapping of a twig.

She stepped backward. One, two steps.

Then—

A figure stepped from the shadows.

Silas.

But something was wrong.

His eyes were too wide. Too still. His coat was drenched—like he'd walked through a thunderstorm, though the sky above was clear. “Elara,” he said, voice flat.

“You weren’t supposed to see this place—the house”

“I know,” he said.

“I didn’t leave. You just. Weren’t meant to see me.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

Silas blinked, slow, like a machine rebooting. “You opened the door.”

“And?”

“Then it’s already started.”

He turned and walked away.

Not back toward the house-but deeper into the woods.

Something inside her bones was telling her not to follow.

But curiosity conquered caution and she ran after him.

Every step changed the woods. Trees leaned in, the air

And then they reached it: an old shed, half-swallowed by ivy.

Metal

Rusted. Door hanging off one hinge.

Silas reached inside his coat and pulled something out.

A cassette tape.

Labelled in red ink: **“DO NOT LISTEN– 1995”**

Silas nodded.

He held out the tape. His hand shook. “She recorded it. The night before she disappeared the first time.”

Elara stared at it. “What do you mean, first time?”

But Silas didn't respond.

Instead, he said: “I’ll wait outside. Listen if you want.”

He pushed the shed door open.

Inside, dust, rotted floorboards, old tools hanging like meat hooks. A tape recorder sat on a wooden stool, waiting.

She looked down at the cassette.

Its plastic was warm.

Too warm.

There was dead silence inside the shed. Even the insects refused to chirp.

She put the tape in, clicked it into place, pressed PLAY.

At first-static. Like wind clawing through wires.

Then her mother's voice.

Panicked, breathless.

“I don’t know if this will survive the night. If you find this—if you’re

Just by hearing my voice—you’re already in danger. He’s found you. He never forgets.

The sound of something in the background. A music box melody,

“It started with the mirror. Always does. I thought I could trick him—I thought if I burnt the music, it would cease. But it never goes away. He's in the house. He’s in the glass.”

Glass shattering.

A scream.

Cut.

Elara yanked the tape out, heart slamming.

She turned.

Silas was gone.

In his place-something stood in the fog.

Not a person.

Its shape kept changing, like her brain couldn't decide what it was seeing. Long limbs, shadow-thin, fingers too many, head cocked at an unnatural angle.

The song started over again. In her mind.

Turn around. Walk away. He only comes when you look.

She bolted.

Elara didn't remember running.

Only the abrupt recognition of her knees striking the floor in the living room back at the house.

The record player spun again.

That same melody.

But something new waited on the couch.

A note.

Her name in red ink.

Inside: a place. The coordinates. And the time. "11:17 PM – under the chapel."

She looked at the time.

11:06 PM.

It stood like a forgotten tooth against the hillside of grey stone, slate roof split down the middle, and a crooked steeple pointing toward sighed as it cooled, the only sound for miles.

11:13 PM.

She clutched the note. "11:17 PM – under the chapel."

Wind tugged at her coat. The moon was a sharp white disc overhead, slicing shadows across the broken gravestones lining the chapel yard.

She stepped through the rusted gate.

The door to the chapel groaned open before she touched it secrets into the floor. Behind it, strange circular etchings were carved into the stone floor—carved symbols she didn't recognize, yet felt in her blood. Swirls and angles like the music that is written in geometry.

Her phone buzzed.

A message. Unknown number.

Too late to stop now

A hollow knock sounded when she stepped near the altar. Elara crouched and pressed her hand on the ground.

A seam. Thin. Clean.

She found the edge and pulled.

She hesitated.

A weird mix. As if something holy had decomposed long ago.

She switched on her flashlight and went down. The staircase terminated at a narrow tunnel. The walls were lined with murals—half-faded paintings of women in green dresses standing besides mirrors, music boxes, pianos. Their faces were blurred by time, but their eyes had been re-painted over and over again.

Elara didn't know them.

Yet. they knew her.

Every painting seemed to watch her as she passed. One even had a hand. She came to the end of the corridor. Before her lay a heavy wooden door. The centre of it was carved with a symbol: a treble clef inside a circle of thorns.

She touched it.

The wood pulsed beneath her fingers.

Then, the door opened itself.

The crypt beyond was enormous—high cathedral ceilings, pillars carved from black stone, and hundreds of candles flickering without flame or smoke.

In the centre: a pedestal.

And atop it.

A music box.

But not like any she'd ever seen.

It was shaped like a mirror. A compact square, edged in silver, with an inlaid portrait of a girl who looked unsettlingly like Elara—but with darker eyes, and a scar beneath her right cheek.

She drew closer.

Her ears rang.

Then—

A voice whispered in her mind:

"We remember what you forgot."

She reached out to touch the music box—

The room was spinning.

She wasn't herself.

She was seeing through someone else's eyes. Smaller hands. A dress soaked in red. She stood before a mirror, and he stood behind her.

Only a silhouette. A man-shaped shadow. No features.

He reached down, touched her shoulder.

Whispered:

“Your name is not Elara. It never was.”

The mirror shattered.

She screamed.

She sat up in the crypt and gasped. Her nose was bleeding.

Inside it a letter. Sealed with green wax thorns.

Hands shaking, she opened it.

The letter was written in looping script; “You were taken from us. Stolen by a woman who thought she could break the bloodline. But blood remembers. And so do we. Return to the lake house before moonrise. Bring the mirror. Do not trust anyone”-Iris Wolfe.

The woman from the journal. The name marked deceased. But the handwriting was fresh. As if it had been penned an hour ago.

A sound behind her.

Elara turned.

Silas stood at the edge of the tunnel, his eyes glinting in the candlelight. “You weren’t supposed to find this,” he said quietly.

A beat of silence.

Then Elara said, “Why does she look like me?”

Silas didn't answer.

Instead, he said “Because you’re not the first Elara.”

Elara stared at Silas.

Silas took one step forward, then stopped, as if crossing an invisible line. He looked older now, exhausted, like every secret he'd ever kept had

It clawed its way to the surface. “You were born once,” he said, voice low. “Then... you were born again.” “That’s not how that works.”

He gave a bitter smile. “No. It’s not.”

A long silence followed. Elara's heart beat against her ribs like it was trying to escape. “She disappeared.” “I don’t understand.”

“She tried to bring you back.”

But the look in his eyes said not from the dead.

From somewhere worse.

The drive to the lake house felt like drifting through a fever dream.

Fog hung low across the road, blurring the trees into long skeletal
Fingers ache from clutches onto the steering wheel.

The music box lay on the seat beside her, closed again, still.
It didn't feel like an object anymore. It felt like a presence.
She hadn't been back to the lake house since she was eleven.
Not since her mother had woken her in the middle of the
night, thrown a duffel bag. But it was still there.
The warped and broken dock, The green canoe half-
submerged at the river side. The door was locked.
She didn't have a key.
But her hand moved of its own accord.

The pattern from the lullaby.
The door creaked open.
There was nobody inside.
At least-not that she could see.
She stepped into the living room, and it hit her like a wave:
the smell.
Dried lavender. Old wood. Vanilla. The ghost of summer.
Something tugged in her chest fingers. "Do you hear it?" her
mother whispered. "The song?" "No," she said. "Her name."
The memory shattered like a dropped glass.
Elara pitched forward, her heart racing.
There was a record player on the table.
It wasn't plugged in.
Still, it turned.

Slowly. Smoothly. Playing nothing.

But as she drew closer—she heard something faint.

A voice.

"Under the light. Find what you buried."

Moonlight streamed in the window onto the floorboards.

There, in the glow—a faint shape.

A square.

She moved the rug, then the boards. They were loose.

Elara pried one up with shaking fingers.

Contents: a wooden box, wrapped in yellowed linen.

She unwrapped it.

Another letter.

This one. was addressed to her. But not in her mother's handwriting.

She opened it.

She had written the letter in her own handwriting.

But she'd never written it.

"If you're reading this, then it's already breaking through. The memories. The bleed. You've probably seen her by now—green dress, glass eyes. She's not a ghost. She's you. One version of you. The one who didn't survive. Don't believe anything Silas tells you. He thinks he's helping. The real key is in the mirror. The lake mirror. Play the tape beneath it at moonrise. And whatever happens—don't let Him speak your name."

The paper crumbled in her hand.

She got up too quickly.

The room was different.

Everything was older. Darker. The couch gone. The walls stripped. Dust thick on the floor.

The mirror over the mantelpiece glittered.

Elara stepped toward it.

The lake reflected in it moved slightly out of sync with the real one. It was wide.

The child version lifted a finger.

On the mantle. Same model as in the shed.

Labelled in neat black ink: “LAKE MIRROR – 12:00 AM”

The clock struck twelve.

The air tightened.

Elara started the tape.

Hit play.

Static.

Then: a man’s voice. Calm. Measured.

“She is not one. She is many. She is a vessel. And each time the line breaks I follow the melody back.”

A pause. Then the sound of a child laughing.

Then: Elara’s own voice, much younger.

“Who are you?”

The man again.

“I am the echo that followed you home.”

Click.

The tape ended.

Then she heard it.

Footsteps upstairs.

Slow.

Deliberate.

She grabbed the flashlight and crept to the stairs, heart hammering. The air was colder now. Every step groaned under her weight.

At the top—nothing.

Just the hallway. Empty.

Then, her old bedroom door opened by itself.

Indoors, everything was just as she had remembered.

Except for the girl standing in the corner.

Back turned.

Hair in braids.

Scar on her cheek.

She slowly turned around.

And smiled. “You’re late,” the girl said.

The girl in green cocked her head to one side.

She was perhaps ten—hair braided, socks pulled up to her had watched for centuries and was just finding a reason to blink.

“You’re late,” the girl said again.

Elara's voice was a rasp. "Who... are you?"

"You know." The girl smiled softly. "You've always known."
"No."

The girl stepped closer. "You buried me."

Elara backed into the hallway. "That's not possible."

The girl followed. "You thought if you grew up fast enough, you could outrun me."

The house groaned around them.

Paint peeled itself from the walls. The lights flickered and burst one by one. The record player downstairs started playing again, even though Elara hadn't touched it.

The girl's voice changed-deeper now, like a radio tuning between Elara turned and ran.

Back down the stairs. The girl didn't chase her.

Didn't need to.

Because her voice was still in Elara's ear:

"The mirror will show you. But not all at once. You'll have to listen to remember."

There was something different in the living room, too: the mirror above the fireplace.

The frame had peeled away, revealing something mechanical beneath—cogs, gears, almost like a clock's innards. The reflection flickered like a faulty screen.

She stepped closer.

Her reflection didn't match the motions.

It stood still.
Then lifted a hand.
And pointed left.
Elara turned.
To the bookshelf.
A gap between volumes.
It led to a narrow passage.
The air inside was wrong.
It didn't feel like air.
It felt like memory.
Dust didn't rise; it fell.
Every step was echoed behind her before she'd even made it.
The hall terminated in a circular room with an assemblage of mirrors, all veiled in black cloth. Set upon a pedestal in the centre was a reel-to-reel tape recorder.
Two reels, one labelled "June 17th – 3:03 AM" in sharp blocky handwriting.
She hit PLAY.
Static.
Then-her mother's voice.
"She's waking up again. Not just dreams anymore. She looks in the mirror and sees someone else. She speaks in her sleep, words that aren't hers. Iris, what did we do wrong?"
Then, another voice.

Older. Harsher. Iris Wolfe.

“You broke the rule. You named her after yourself. The mirror doesn’t like confusion. It splits to survive.”

Elara's breath hitched.

“So how do we fix it?”

A pause. Then:

“We don’t. We just try again. But the price —”

Something behind her. One of the mirrors had shed its cloth.

Her reflection was gone.

Instead—another girl. Not the child in green. Older. Maybe seventeen.

Her face pale, hair floating as if underwater. Eyes wide and black.

She mouthed the words “You’re almost me again.”

Then the mirror cracked.

The floor tilted.

The elastic walls stretched upward.

Someone dragging a bow across piano strings.

Elara ran.

Back through the corridor.

Back into the lake house—

But the house was wrong now.

The walls were melting like wax. The furniture had reversed—everything upside down. And outside, through the

windows, there was no lake. Only mirror—an infinite silver surface, with things swimming beneath.

She stumbled, fell to her knees, and shouted: “MAKE IT STOP!”

Silence.

Then—

A soft knock at the door.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

The lullaby rhythm is

She crawled to the door and opened it—

And Silas stood there.

But younger.

Maybe thirty.

Bleeding from the scalp. Clothes torn. Eyes wild. “Elara?”, he whispered.

She blinked. “Silas?” “I tried to stop them. I tried to keep the mirror sealed.” “What is this place?” Timelines are folding in.”

He grasped her wrist, hard. “You need to get out before he finds your name.” “I don’t —Elara is only what they called you this time.”

Then—

Behind him.

A hand.
Long. Pale. Claw-like.
It tapped Silas's shoulder.
His eyes widened.
Then he was gone.
Just gone.
Behind her, the mirror had shattered.
And from the shards—
A dozen versions of herself.
wept blood.
They moved towards her in unison.
And then—
Darkness.
In the lake, Elara awoke.
Gasping. Coughing.
Moonlight overhead. Dock just ahead.
She crawled to shore.
The world was quiet.
Like it was watching.
She pulled the soaked letter from her pocket.
The ink had sifted.
Now, in her own handwriting right across the top: “One more
tape. One final mirror. Then you choose which girl you’ll be.”

Elara sat on the edge of the dock, shaking, soaked letter clinched. tight in her fist. Her breath was ragged, chest rising and falling like a storm-tossed sea.

The lake was unnervingly still. No frogs. No insects. Just silence—thick and absolute.

She pulled the music box close, its silver surface cold against her palm.

One more tape.

Her fingers hovered over the box's catch. Her mind screamed don't open it. But curiosity, or perhaps desperation, won.

The box clicked open.

Inside, under the mirrored lid, lay a slender cassette tape.

Labelled, in faded ink: **"The Last Echo"**

The sky above rippled like water. Clouds twisted into faces she'd seen in the mirrors—the green girl, the pale teenager, even herself, distorted and fractured loose plank. The machine whirred and hissed, then started playing.

A man's voice again

"The mirror breaks, yet the echo does not. She is the sum of her parts—The lost, the broken, the stolen names whispered into the void.

Yet, there is a choice.

One girl holds the whole.

One girl to be free.

A breath. Then—

"If you hear this, it means you are close."

But closer still is he.

One that calls your name to unravel the soul.

Do not listen.

Do not answer.

Trust only the silence between the notes.

The tape cut out. Static hissed in her ears like a warning.

Then the water behind her rippled.

She whipped around.

The surface fractured.

A figure emerged.

Tall.

Dark.

Its face was a shifting shadow-never quite forming.

It reached out a hand.

Slowly.

Elara's heart froze. "Elara," it whispered. "Your name is mine."

She stumbled backward.

It flipped shut of its own accord.

The lake was still once more.

But she could still hear it.

A voice inside her head.

“Say my name.”

She shook her head, eyes wide, heart hammering. “Not yours.”

But the shadow moved faster than thought, darting across the dock in a heartbeat.

Its fingers brushed against her cheek—and the world shattered.

She found herself somewhere else.

Cold stone walls, endless mirrors; the air smelled of metal and rain. Her eyes no longer empty, but full of knowing. “This is the choice,” she said. “You can be me. You can be her. Or you can break the cycle.”

Elara’s hands shook. “I don’t even know who I am.”

The girl smiled sorrowfully. “Neither do I. But together—we can remember.”

A mirror cracked behind them.

It crept closer, whispering, the shadow.

“Say my name.”

Chapter 8 “Doubt”

The air hung heavy in the night, almost suffocating, as Elara sat alone on the rickety dock overlooking the black lake. The silver moon above was no comfort—it felt like a cold eye, watching her unravel.

Her hands she trembled, clenching the music box tightly, the weight of the final tape inside pressed against her palm like a heartbeat she couldn't get away from.

One final choice.

Her mind spun, tangled between the voices—the green girl's whispered promises, Silas's desperate warnings, and the shadow's chilling call. She was a fracture—a prism of selves scattered across time and memory and the edges were sharp, ready to cut her apart.

The lake below reflected her fragmented soul, each ripple a question she couldn't answer.

Elara's fingers hovered over the latch of the music box. With a breath so shaky it felt like inhaling glass shards, she flipped it open and pulled out the slender case labelled **"The Final Echo"**

The letters seemed slightly faded, but the weight of them pressed down like lead. She crossed the dock, her steps uncertain, toward the loose plank where she kept the old tape recorder. The machine felt alien in her hands, a relic from a past life, but it was the key.

She slid the tape in.

The recorder hummed alive, then crackled with static.

And then—the man's voice returned, calm and grave.

“The mirror breaks, yet the echo remains.

She is the sum of her parts-

The lost, the broken, the stolen names whispered into the void.

There is, however, a choice.

One girl to hold the whole.

One girl to be free.”

Elara’s heart slammed. “If you hear this, it means you are close.

But closer still is He.

The one who calls your name in order to unravel your soul.

Do not listen.

Do not answer.

Trust only the silence between the notes.”

The tape hissed and warped.

Her breath hitched as the air behind her shifted-the lake's surface

rippled.

A dark figure rose from the water like a wound in reality.

It had no face, only a moving void that sucked the light and hope alike.

It reached out, voice low and rasping: “Elara.”

She attempted to step back, but her limbs betrayed her- heavy, as if weighted by regret. “Your name is mine,” it whispered.

The voice echoed inside her skull, dripping poison. “Say my name.”

Elara's jaw clenched.

“No,” she said, her voice barely a whisper.

But the shadow closed in, fingers grazing her cheek with an icy touch.

The world warped, collapsing like wet paper.

Opening her eyes, she was trapped in the Between; a cold stone chamber lined with mirrors veiled by black cloth.

The air was thick, electric.

The green girl stepped forward, older now, her eyes gleaming with impossible knowledge. “This is the choice,” she said softly. “You can be me.

You can be her.

Or you can break the cycle.”

Elara's soul screamed in confusion. “Who am I?” she whispered.

The girl smiled sadly. “Neither do I. But together we remember.”

The voice of the shadow slithered around the walls. “Say my name.”

One by one, the black cloth ripped away from the mirrors.

Inside each glass, a different Elara stared back—some crying, some

Some laugh and some are silent.

Elara reached out to the nearest mirror.

Her reflection rippled and changed-she saw herself as a child, innocent and terrified; as a teenager, defiant and broken; as the woman she was now lost and desperate.

Each self reached back.

Whispers seemed to fill the chamber in an unearthly chorus:
“Remember.”

“You forgot.”

“Trust no one.”

“Say my name.”

Her fingers quivered.

A sudden panic seized her-how many Elara’s were real? How many were echoes, shadows, lies?

The green girl stepped beside her. “We are all pieces. But only one can be whole.”

Elara shut her eyes.

The shadow's voice grew louder, a chorus of demands and threats. “Say my name.”

She shook her head violently. “No.”

The chamber twisted, time unrevealing.

Memories flooded her—her mother’s lullabies, Silas’s warnings, the cruel smile of woman in green.

But there was more.

Memories not hers.

Dark woods at dusk.

A music box, hidden under fallen leaves.

A scream swallowed by silence.

A man calling out her name, not the shadow nor anything else.

Someone human.

She gasped.

The voice of the green girl was softer now. “There is a truth beneath all this—buried in the silence between echoes.” Elara blinked and the mirrors shifted again, disclosing a small hidden room.

Inside, a chest of wood was sitting beneath the one moonbeam.

She opened it.

Inside was a diary bound in cracked leather.

The first page was written in her handwriting.

But the date was decades old. “If you find this, you are lost between worlds.

I am the original.

The one who never left.

He is not a shadow; he is a name, a curse, a hunger.

Remember.

And do not respond.”

Elara's hands shook.

The whisper of the shadow was everywhere now. “Say my name.”

The green girl reached out, her hand trembling. “Choose.”

Elara closed her eyes.

A thousand voices inside her screamed. “Say it.”

“Remember.”

“Break free.”

“Be whole.”

The mirrors shattered.

Light exploded.

And—

Elara woke up on the dock.

He closed the music box.

The tape recorder was silent.

The moon was setting.

She didn't know if she had made a choice or if the choice was still waiting.

But one thing was certain:

Her name no longer belonged exclusively to her.

And the doubt—smothering, relentless doubt—was just getting underway.

Chapter 9 “The Break”

Elara awoke with a jolt.

But it wasn't the dock, the lake, or even the music box she'd left behind.

She was elsewhere.

A place where the sky bled colours that should not exist—sharp shards of violet slicing through the pale-yellow dusk. The ground beneath her was soft but shifting, like moss that breathed.

She sat up, disoriented.

Her limbs felt heavy, as if soaked in water, but when she looked down, her hands were translucent, fingertips fading into nothingness.

A whispered voice curled around her ear. “You're breaking,” it said--soft and mournful.

Elara spun around.

Nobody was there.

But the air shimmered, like heat waves off of asphalt, and slowly the landscape morphed.

Trees contorted into tall mirror's , their glass faces reflecting fragments of her past.

Each reflection was a different Elara.

One child, eyes wide with fear.

One teenage girl, biting her lip in silent anger.

One woman, with tears streaming down her face.

All calling to her-pleading. “Remember.”

“Choose.”

“Don’t forget.”

Whispers multiplied, drowning the silence with a tide of voices: soft, harsh, desperate.

Elara covered her ears. “No. No. Stop.”

But the voices seeped into her skin, into her bones, into her blood.

She stumbled backward and crashed into one of the mirrored trees.

The glass cracked, and suddenly she was falling.

Endless fall through shards of broken memories.

Below, a flash of a room.

A little girl's laughter.

A man's voice, deep and urgent. “Elara... don't trust the mirror.”

Then silence.

She landed hard on cold stone.

The room was a cathedral of mirrors: walls, ceiling, floor, all of glass.

But each mirror showed not her reflection, but another story.

One mirror reflected a family dinner, her mother smiling—but the smiles were twisted, eyes hollow.

Another showed a dark forest at midnight, a lone music box gleaming beneath a silver moon

A third held a shadow reaching out for her name, whispering threats she couldn't quite hear.

Elara moved between them, desperate for answers, but the images shifted like smoke—never still long enough to catch. “Who am I?”, she whispered, voice breaking.

The mirrors rippled and one cracked open like a door.

A figure stepped through-Silas.

But not the man she remembered.

Younger. Bruised. Wounded.

His eyes were haunted but burning with something fierce.

“Elara,” he said. “You’re in the break.”

She shook her head. “Where? What is this?”

Silas looked around, panic creeping in. “The space between. Between memories. Between time. Between choices. It's the fracture where you're breaking apart.”

Elara's mind spiralled. “I'm breaking?” “Yes. And if you don't fix it--”

He was cut off by a whisper.

A voice that slithered between them.

“Say my name.”

The glass around them trembled.

Silas grasped her hand. “We don't have much time.”

Elara’s breath hitched. “I don’t know what to choose.” “You have to.”

But the shadows gathered.

And the selves splintered forth called out. “Choose.”

“Remember.”

“Say it.”

Her head spun.

She clutched her temples.

And then—

A crack split the cathedral.

And the world broke wide open.

“To name something is to bind it. To speak it is to free it. To remember it—is to live it again.”

Cracks then raced through the cathedral of glass like a scream, under the surface.

The mirrors exploded in a crescendo; Elara barely had time to stumble of shattering reflections. Light sliced the space around her into impossible angles.

She dropped down onto her knees. Silas crouched beside her, shielding and drew her to him against his chest, his breathing touching her neck.

But even as his voice whispered, something inside her recoiled.

This wasn't the Silas she knew.

Not the one from the lake.

Not the one from the shed.

His voice was just a little wrong. His hands too cold. His gaze—off.

Focused a little to the left of her eyes.

She tried to pull away. “Don’t,” he said. “If you step out of the break now, you won’t come back whole”. “What are you?” she breathed.

The thing that wore Silas's face smiled faintly. “The version of him that stayed.”

A cold wind rolled through the shattered glass space, blowing through the broken reflections like leaves from a forgotten season.

She rose.

He followed. “The real Silas—” she began. “—is scattered,” he said. “Like you.”

He reached toward her. “Let me help you remember.”

She took a step back. “Why do you want me to remember?”

His silence was too long.

Then: “Because if you don’t, he will remember for you.”

A shard of light floated down like a feather.

When Elara touched it, she was elsewhere.

Kneeling in a field of wilted sunflowers under a blackened sky.

There was only one mirror standing in the middle-tall, angular, alive.

Beneath it: a stone well.

At its base, a tape recorder.

No label, just a silver button that blinked softly.

She approached. The well hummed.

She could feel her name vibrating in the air.

But not her name now.

Her previous name,

She didn't hit play.

Not yet.

The mirror above the well started to ripple, showing images that struck her like thunder:

Her mother, who whispers into a child's ear. "Don't listen when they call you twice."

A green girl stands beside a piano, her fingers bleeding. "You left me there."

A boy with grey eyes holding her hand in a field. "You promised you'd never say it."

A figure of smoke, eyes like stars, whispering: "Say my name, and I'll tell you the truth."

She pressed play.

The tape crackled. Then came a child's voice—her own. "What if I'm not me?"

Then her mother's voice: tight, trembling. "You are. Because I gave you that name. You weren't real until I did."

Then nothing.

Then a man's voice she didn't recognize. "The name binds. The name opens. The name repeats."

A beat. "She remembers. That's when he comes."

Elara stepped back.
The mirror shone white-hot.
She turned to run.
But standing behind her-
Him.
He was not a man.
Not a monster.
Something in between-a silhouette stitched from all the fears
she had never spoken aloud.
He didn't walk; he unfolded.
He reached out, and the world bent around his hand. "Say it,"
he whispered. "Say the name."
It seared her lips.
The forbidden sound.
The echo in every lullaby. The secret threaded into her blood.
"No." she hissed.
In an instant, she was back-enclosed in a room without walls.
Just voices.
Whispers written across the sky.
Names—dozens, hundreds—all her own.
Versions of Elara that she had never met but carried in her.
Each one pleading to be picked.
Each one warning of what would happen if she did.
And in the middle of the room:

The last music box.
Black. Unmarked.
No hinge. No latch.
It opened only with her voice.
She stepped forward.
The voices stopped the instant her fingers touched it.
Everything went still.
Then, a soft, familiar whisper: “Elara, listen.”
It was Silas.
The real Silas.
Older. Weary.
Recorded on tape. “If you find this... it means the cycle is breaking.”
“He feeds on the echo of your name. Not your body. Not your soul. Just the memory of who you were. Every time you remember—he becomes real.”
“You don’t have to defeat him. Just don’t say it.” “Don’t say your name.”
The tape stopped.
She stood before the black music box.
The chamber darkened.
Behind her, the mirror pulsed with reflected possibilities.
Choose.
She might remember everything if she opened the box.

She might learn the name.

She might lose herself.

If she didn't-

She would remain fractured, a ghost of herself.

Alone.

The shadow stepped into the chamber.

Closer than before.

His eyes were a mirror of her own.

He smiled with a mouth made of broken songs. "Say it," he whispered. "Say what you are."

The green girl appeared beside her—her younger self. "She won't," she said.

Then Elara realized—

The girl had no mouth.

Because she had taken it.

Long ago.

To keep the name safe.

To survive

She looked back at the shadow. "Not yet," she said.

She then closed her music box.

The shadow howled, not in pain, but disappointment.

The chamber started to collapse.

The mirrors turned black.

The walls bled names.
Elara ran.
Through time.
Through memory.
Through versions of herself.
She ran until she was alone again.
Back on the dock.
The calm lake.
The tape recorder blank.
The sky bruised with dawn.
She was still fractured.
But the box was sealed.
The name went unspoken.
And for now—
That was enough.

Chapter 10 “The Cliffside Journal”

"Before they named me, I was a wind with no direction. A memory no one remembered."

The sky didn't wait for the sun to rise.

It bloomed violet over the lake like a bruise, spreading slowly, quietly, as if the world itself was holding its breath. The edge of the cliff was raw with cold and wind. Black gravel cracked under Elara's boots, the sound swallowed by the emptiness below.

She hadn't slept. She hadn't even sat down. Something had pulled her here—out of the cabin, away from the forest's tangled grief, beyond the last remembered path.

She stood at the threshold of something unspoken.

Behind her, the trees rustled like gossipers—whispering secrets only the broken that could understand. The ones who didn't come back. The ones who they left parts of themselves in shadows and reflections.

She didn't look back.

There was nothing to bring back.

The music box was gone, vanished from the drawer where it had sat since her mother disappeared.

The tape recorder, with its distorted messages and warped voice, had melted into static and wind.

Even the version of herself that had believed in time, in identity, in memory—that girl had burned away in the fire she couldn't see but still felt upon her skin.

What remained was silence. And breath. And a journal she couldn't explain. "I'm still here," she said.

But it didn't sound like her.

It sounded older.

Or younger.

Or both.

She reached into her coat pocket, fingers trembling like the limbs of the half-dead trees around her. The journal was there—leather-bound, warped by water or weather, pages wrapped tightly with fraying twine.

She hadn't packed it. She didn't remember touching it before now.

But it felt warm in her hands, like it remembered her.

She untied it.

The first thing she noticed was the smell—salt and smoke, ink and something sour, like dried blood. The second was the writing. It was hers. Her slanted, sharp script—but faster, more desperate. Scrawled in panic or purpose.

And it wasn't addressed to her.

It was from her.

Give to another.

To a person who hadn't yet woken.

To someone who would.

And as her fingers turned the page, she began to understand what she had lost—and what still waited to be found.

The first page wasn't numbered.

It started mid-sentence, like whoever had written it—she—had ripped the beginning out. Maybe on purpose. Maybe because she didn't want just the parts that bled, the whole story.

“—can't remember if the lake was already frozen or if I just stopped noticing it either way is irrelevant. If you're reading this, it means the loop cracked. Something got through. Maybe you.”

Elara blinked. The wind hit harder now, like the air itself was listening.

She looked over her shoulder. The trees didn't move.

She continued reading.

“You must keep awake. That's rule number one. If you fall asleep longer, it resets everything. Not time exactly—more like, your place inside it. You'll forget things. Big things. People. Your name. Worse: you'll think you remember, and you won't know the difference.”

His handwriting slanted downward, as if collapsing.

“If you found this journal, then one of us slipped. And if I'm already gone, just—don't trust the man in the mirror. I thought he was you. He's not. You'll know what I mean when it's too late. Sorry about that.”

Elara let out a shaky breath. “What the actual hell,” she whispered.

The page fluttered in her hand as if it would speak for itself.

Somewhere beneath the cliff, the lake stirred-sufficiently for the ice to moan. She hadn't even realized it was frozen until that sound cut through the stillness.

Not wind, not water. Something underneath.

The next page had one sentence, dead centre. “You’ve already been here before.”

Elara dropped the journal like it had burned her.

She took a backward step.

Then two.

The ground didn't feel solid. Like it might give way, like gravity was just another lie out here.

She looked down at her hands. Her skin was pale—paler than usual— and the tips of her fingers were stained with something dark. Not quite dirt. Not quite ink.

It smelled of the journal.

Salt.

Smoke.

And blood.

Her phone was dead, naturally. It had been for days. Weeks?
No bars.

No time. Just that permanent, quiet failure that meant the world had she decided to stop talking to her.

She sat.

Finally.

The gravel dug into her knees. It was too quiet to cry, and too late to scream. She laughed. A weird, choked thing that barely sounded

Human.

And then-movement.

From the trees.

Not a deer.

Not wind.

Not even an animal trying to be brave.

It was the sound of someone walking like they'd forgotten how. Slow.

Too slow. Like every joint cracked with memory.

She snapped her head up. "Who's there?"

No answer.

Just the sound of boots—mirroring her own—crunching black gravel.

But no one stepped into view.

Just longer, sharper shadows stretching across the clearing.

Elara snatched up the journal. Against every instinct, she turned another page.

This one was different—drawn, not written. A map.

Crude lines.

Landmarks she half-recognized:

the cabin marked by an ✕, the lake - a black smear, and then-
something circled in red.

Something she hadn't seen yet.

The Mouth.

Just those two words. Handwritten beside the circle.

She didn't know what it was.

But she knew where it was.

Past the lake. Beyond the burn line in the trees. Through
whatever waited on the other side of forgetting.

The sound of footsteps stopped.

Close.

Too close.

Elara stood, fingers clutched around the journal like it was a
weapon.

She didn't look back.

Not this time.

She walked forward, toward the trees that didn't remember
her name, toward the part of the map that had been circled
like a warning-or a dare.

The sky was still violet.

Still bruised.

And the sun hadn't risen yet.

The forest beyond the lake was different.

It didn't feel wild--it felt designed. Like someone had tried to make it look like a forest, yet got the details wrong. Every tree stood just a little too straight. Every branch was bent the same way. Nothing rustled unless she moved first.

Elara stepped over the burn line—an arc of blackened roots and ash that cut through the woods like a scar. On the map this was the border. The edge of what she was supposed to remember.

Her boots crunched over bones that she told herself were branches.

The map said “The Mouth” was east. Or whatever passed for east now, since the sky refused to change. It was still that same half-lit violet, like the world had paused in mid-apocalypse. No sun. No moon. Only the eternal waiting room of a bad dream.

She walked for what could've been ten minutes or ten hours. Time flexed here-soft and stretchy like gum under your shoe.

And then she saw it.

It wasn't a cave. It wasn't even a place.

It was a door.

Just. standing there. Alone, between the trees.

No hinges, no frame, no building to belong to.

There was nothing there but a black wooden door, standing slightly ajar.

Painted on it-messy, like someone had used his hands-were the words:

YOU AREN'T SUPPOSED TO REMEMBER

Elara's breath caught.

The words pulsed, faded, and reappeared, as though they were glitching.

She touched the journal in her coat. It felt hot again. Almost vibrating.

She flipped the page to the next.

Another message, written like it had been scrawled mid-run: “If you find the Mouth, don’t open it. Unless you’re ready to meet the thing that wears your voice.”

She stared at the door.

It was open.

Just a sliver.

Behind it—blackness. Not darkness. Blackness. Like the kind that isn’t as empty, yet full. The kind that listens.

She reached out.

Paused.

Took one breath. Then two.

The forest fell completely silent.

No bugs.

No wind.

No heartbeat.

And then—

A voice.

From the other side of the door.

Quiet. Barely audible. Yet hers. “Elara.”

She froze.

It wasn't a memory. It wasn't a recording.

It was her voice. Not just the sound—but the way she thought.
“You forgot me. Again. But I didn’t forget you.”

The journal in her hand flipped pages on its own, whipping
like it was caught in a storm.

Words blurred and then aligned into a sentence: **“IFYOUANSWER
IT BECOMES YOU”**

Elara stepped back.

But her voice didn’t stop. “You left me here.”

A pause. “Let me in.”

She clutched the journal, forcing it shut with both arms. Her
mouth opened-reflex-but nothing came out.

The door creaked, as if it felt her hesitation, too. “Please,” her
voice pleaded. “You said you’d come back.”

Her brain screamed to run.

But her body?

Her body stepped forward.

One step.

Then another.

Her fingers reached out, almost without her permission.

Then—

A noise.

Sharp.

Real.

A ringtone.

Somewhere, her phone was ringing.

Her dead phone.

She jerked her hand back, heart slamming.

Fumbled in her coat.

And there it was.

Lit up.

Screen cracked, battery 1%.

A call.

UNKNOWN NUMBER.

Her thumb hovered.

And before she could decide whether or not to answer.

The door slammed shut.

Boom.

Everything just went black.

Elara didn't remember falling.

But when she opened her eyes, she lay in the middle of the cabin floor.

The same cabin.

The one that had been empty.

Except now it wasn't.

The lights were on.

The air smelled of coffee and shampoo and something warm—familiar in a way that made her sick with longing.

And music was playing. Low. Crackly.

A song she hadn't heard since she was thirteen.

Paramore.

The only exception.

Her boots were gone. Her coat too. She was barefoot, dressed in an oversized hoodie she hadn't seen in years—the one her mom used to wear when she was sad and didn't want anyone to notice.

The journal was still clutched in her hand.

And it looked...different.

Newer. The leather was smooth. Untouched. No twine, no torn pages.

She opened it.

The pages were blank.

All of them.

No map, no message, no warnings.

Just one stick-note on the inside cover.

In the same handwriting as before; “She’s watching now. Pretend to forget.”

Elara rose slowly. Her legs felt off-balance, as if gravity was holding its breath.

The cabin door was closed-bolted.

And from the hallway—movement.

Not a shadow.

A person.

And then-her mom walked in.

Smiling.

Holding a cup of tea like it was any normal Tuesday. “El?” her mother said, casual. “You okay? You passed out for a second.”

Elara blinked. Her mouth moved but no sound came forth.

This wasn't right.

She had lost her mother.

Her mom had been gone for five years. “Elara,” her mom said again, and this time her tone shifted-something in her eyes sharpened, like glass behind skin. “You remember me, don’t you?”

And Elara comprehended.

This wasn't her mom.

This thing was wearing her face.

And this was a test.

She forced a smile. “N-no,” she said, voice cracking. “I think I hit my head.”

The thing nodded, too smoothly. “Of course. That must be it.”

It handed her the tea.

Elara took it with shaking hands, pretending to sip.

The journal burned hot against her palm. She clutched it tighter, praying it would give her something.

And it did.

Right on the first page, in faint ink that shimmered only when she tilted

it just right, a message revealed itself:

You're not the original.

Her vision blurred. Everything in the room warped for a second—like

Reality was buffering.

Another line emerged:

You woke up wrong.

The cabin flickered.

Like a screen glitching.

The walls canted inward. The song looped back. Same line. Over and

over. “You are... the only exception...” “You are... the only exception...” “You are...”

Elara dropped the tea. It shattered, steam hissing across the floorboards.

She ran.

Through the fake hallway, through the walls that pulsed like lungs.

And as she flung open the back door—

She didn't find a forest.

She found rows.
Dozens.
Hundreds.
Maybe several thousand more cabins.
Just like hers.
And in front of each one: a version of her.
Some standing.
Some sitting.
Some stared up at the sky with empty eyes.
All frozen.
like dolls standing ready for the play to begin.
Elara stumbled backward.
She wasn't in a forest.
She was in some kind of... simulation.
Or worse-archive.
Where she was the glitch.
And the magazine?
The journal was never intended to be found.
It was the escape key.
And now that she had used it...
something else knew she was awake.

Chapter 11 "The Truth Carried By the Wind"

The consciousness of Elara floated within a void, sensations returning like echoes, from a forgotten dream. The air was thick with the scent of ozone and damp earth. As her eyes fluttered open, she found herself lying on the forest floor, the canopy above filtering the twilight into ethereal patterns.

The journal lay ever-present beside her, its cover now etched with symbols that pulsed faintly.

A whisper, scarcely audible, caressed her ears: “Elara. remember.”

She sat up abruptly, heart pounding. The voice was hers, yet not. It held a weight of memories she couldn't place. The forest around her was silent, unnaturally so, as if holding its breath.

Picking up the journal, she noticed a new entry: “To find the truth, follow the wind. It carries the echoes of who you were.”

A sudden gust rustled the leaves, a clear direction amidst the stillness.

Determined, Elara rose and followed the breeze, each step taking her deeper into the unknown. As she ventured further, the forest began to change. Trees twisted into unnatural shapes of the trees, their branches grasping like skeletal hands. The path became narrow, opening into a small clearing where stood - tall and expression void.

The reflection spoke, voice devoid of emotion: “You left me behind.”

Elara backed away, quite shocked. “Who are you?”

The eyes of the reflection darkened. “The part of you that remembers. The pain, the loss, the truth.”

“I don't understand,” Elara whispered.

“You will,” the reflection said, dissolving into the mirror to leave behind a trail of whispers merged with the wind.

Continuing her journey, Elara came upon a dilapidated cabin, eerily much like her own. Inside, the air was thick with dust and memories.

The walls were lined with photographs—pictures of her with people she couldn't recognize moments she couldn't recall. A tape recorder was sitting on a table, its red-light blinking. Hesitantly, she pressed play.

A distorted voice crackled through: “Elara, if you're hearing this, the cycle has started afresh. Trust the wind, avoid the mirrors, and never speak to the shadows.”

The room suddenly dimmed, the shadows creeping further down the walls. A chill ran down her spine, whispers filled the air.

“Elara. stay.” She ran from the cabin, the wind guiding her away from the encroaching darkness.

The forest opened into a great field, where wind whirled around a solitary tree. Beneath it stood a figure cloaked in shadows.

“Who're you?” Elara called out.

The figure turned, revealing a face identical to hers, but with eyes that shimmered with stars.

“I am the culmination of your choices, the paths taken and forsaken.”

Elara approached cautiously. “What does that mean?”

The figure extended a hand and revealed the journal, now aglow with an inner light. “Within these pages is your truth. However, let me warn you, knowledge comes at a price.”

Elara took the journal and felt its warmth seep into her skin. She opened it the memory flooded her mind, fragmented and chaotic, but undeniably hers.

Overwhelmed, she fell to her knees, tears streaming down her face. The wind whispered around her, carrying voices of her past, present, and possible futures. A gentle touch on her shoulder brought her back. The figure knelt beside her, eyes full of compassion.

“Remember, Elara, the wind carries not just the truth, but the strength to face it.”

With renewed determination, Elara stood, clutching the journal to her chest. The path ahead was uncertain, but she was no longer alone. The wind would guide her, and in its whispers, she would find herself.

The wind didn't stop.

It pulled at her hoodie, tugged her hair, wrapped around her ankles like it was leading her somewhere specific. The journal pulsed in her grasp warmth radiating up her arm, humming like an engine barely held together. Elara did not know what counted as ‘real’ anymore. The forest didn't look like the simulation-it felt older, angrier. Less programmed.

Less clean. The trees weren't just bent; they were broken, split by forces that had no name. Beneath her feet, the soil squelched at each step, dark and wet with something thicker than water.

She didn't speak, didn't dare.

Because the air was listening.

The figure—the star-eyed version of herself—was gone. Not vanished,

Just withdrawn, like a memory closed and filed away too soon. Elara

A voice. Her voice. But this one was screaming.

She stopped.

She burst into another clearing.

And froze.

Because she was already there.

Another Elara. Standing in a ring of white chalk and symbols scorched into the earth. Her face was streaked with dirt and blood, her hands wrapped in chains that seemed to pulse with electricity.

But this Elara was facing a wall of screens-holographic and floating in the air.

Each screen showed memories.

Real ones.

Her first broken bone. The night she lit the candle her mom told her never to touch. The first time she said I love you and

meant it. The day her mother disappeared. The empty drawer. The fire. The cliff. The static voice on the tape recorder.

And watching her... from behind the screens...

Not human. Not entirely.

It was tall, draped in a long coat that shimmered like oil in water. Its face was blurred. Constantly shifting—sometimes hers, sometimes her poison.

The chained Elara gazed back at her; blood dripped from the corner of her mouth. “You need to break the tether,” she said. “What tether?”

The ground under her feet cracked.

The journal flew open in her hands, pages turning like a fan in a hurricane. Symbols she didn't recognize shimmered and rearranged.

Then words—in her handwriting:

ONLY ONE CAN STAY.

Her stomach dropped. “No,” she whispered.

The creature laughed softly. “Oh, but yes,” it purred. “One of you must choose to forget. The other—will be deleted.”

“Farming versions of us for years: memories, emotions, whole lifetimes supposed to die in the loop.”

The journal glowed brighter—words appearing in rapid flashes, like a countdown of truth. “There were 13 of you. Now only 2 remain.”

“She burned the rest.”

“This world is not a prison. It’s a product.”

Elara's mouth went dry. "What do I do?"

"You decide who you are," said the chained version. "Right now, they're both real. But soon? Only one of us will be."

Pulsating blend of all her forgotten selves, fused into a single entity. A memory parasite. A collector.

It smiled. "Time to reboot, little echo."

Pain lanced through her skull. Visions. Screams. Blood on the walls. And then—the gatekeeper. "I left the journal for you."

Her mother's voice.

The thing roared, shrieking, trying to drown it out. "Don't listen. That version corrupted itself. She's lying. You don't need the truth. You need peace."

But Elara knew.

The truth wasn't pretty.

One last message pulsed. **"Write the name of the one who stays. Tear out the page. Burn the rest."**

She looked up.

"I'm ready," she said.

So was Elara.

She wrote.

Then she tore the page out. The other Elara smiled through her tears—

And then vanished.

The forest blinked out.

And she stood once again at the edge of the cliff.

Alone.

The first time she'd seen it in...forever.

All that remained in her grasp was the torn-out page, its edges still glowing.

On the wind, her mother's voice returned. "You're awake now. But they'll come for you again. When they do listen, listen to the wind."

Elara closed her eyes.

And listened.

The wind didn't stop whispering.

It had changed, though. Before, it carried warnings. Now it carried symbol. A program key. Elara stood on the cliff where the sky finally broke into real sunrise, and for the first time, the lake below rippled like it mattered. Real light. Real wind. But none of that felt peaceful. Yet.

Not when she had in her hand a torn page that was fading.

She flipped it over. Ink bled across the surface, reshaping into something new. A message. No—a map.

Thin lines etched out the familiar curve of the forest—but now it extended beyond where she'd ever gone. Past the lake. Past the cabins.

Past what she thought was the end.

In sharp, violent strokes a single word formed at the bottom:
"AUX-0"

She whispered it out loud, and the sky flickered.

Not a metaphor. It literally flickered.

And then the lake drained.

Just drained like someone had unplugged it. The water folded in on itself vortexing down to black. Beneath it, hidden all this time was a enormous iron door, round like a hatch, stamped with the word: **"MEMORY BANK – AUXILIARY NODE 0"**

The map pulsed once more.

Elara didn't wait.

She climbed down the cliff like a woman possessed, dirt and rock.

She shredded her hands, but didn't stop. The closer she got, the more she heard it-like static beneath a melody, a song she almost remembered.

At the hatch, the torn journal page pulsed like a keycard. She reached out and touched it to the metal.

The door hissed open.

She was covered in blood. But stronger now. Like truth had a scent. A thousand invisible systems. Her boots echoed with every step. Screens lit up as she passed, displaying files labelled:

MNEMOSYNC_01

FIELD LOOP. ITERATION 143

ERROR INTEGRITY COMPROMISED

She passed a cracked mirror on the wall and almost didn't look.

Almost.

Her heart fell. “Don’t,” the reflection said softly.

“Don’t go further.”

She clenched her fists. “I don’t take orders from ghosts.”

The reflection smiled-not hers. And then faded.

Down the hall, she found a central chamber—circular, dim, glowing faintly from a control console in the middle. And in the centre of the console...

A second journal.

But this one was locked inside glass.

Before she could reach it, a voice sounded behind her. “Still curious. I should’ve known.”

She turned.

A woman stood there, tall, cloaked in red, hair twisted into a long braid.

Familiar like old nightmares. “Who are you?” Elara asked. “I’m the one who never made it out.”

The woman stepped forward, and Elara saw her face clearly.

It was her in the loop without breaking it.

“You’re what happens when you choose to forget and keep going,” the younger Elara swallowed hard.

“Which one of us is real?”

They stared at each other for a long period.

Then the chamber filled with brightness.

Along the walls, rows of pods flickered to life, each containing...someone. Some looked like Elara. Some didn't. One looked like her mother. One looked like— “Is that—”

“Yes,” the older Elara said.

“Your brother. Or what’s left of him. You never knew him. They took him when you were two. Rewrote the memory. Turned it into a nightmare you’d forget.”

Elara recoiled, stepping backward. “Why?”

“To make you malleable. Fear is programmable. Love makes you unpredictable.”

“But... why me?”

The journal in the glass case pulsed once. A speaker on the wall clicked on. “Final test initiated. Choose: absorb the data and collapse all other selves into primary node—yourself—or destroy the memory and free the theirs.”

“And if I absorb it?”

“You get the truth. All of it. Every life. Every memory. You become the origin. The storm.”

Elara looked at the journal in the glass.

Then at the pods.

Then at her older self. “What would you do?”

Older Elara laughed, bitter. “I already did. That’s why I’m here, Elara guarding the thing I was never brave enough to destroy.”

The screen flickered once more. “THIRTY SECONDS REMAINING.”

The journal began to shake.
Elara reached toward the glass—then stopped.
New text formed: “Truth without purpose is just noise.”
Her mother's handwriting.
Tears welled up in her eyes.
And in that second—she knew what to do.
She slapped the torn page onto the control panel.
Alarms blared.
The chamber shook. “WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” older
Elara shouted.
“Making a third option.”
The pods hissed open.
The glass shattered.
Every ghost reformed.
Memories were pouring into her—not just hers.
The technician's guilt.
The scientist's betrayal.
It all flooded her at once. Too much.
But she didn't break.
She stood in the firestorm of her own mind, and when the
smoke cleared—
The corridor had vanished.
The chamber, too.

She was in a field of mirrors now—dozens of them.

Each one showed a different version of the world.

One where she never picked up the journal.

One where she was just. Happy.

And finally stopped at the one showing her now--tired,
changed, she touched the glass.

She woke in her cabin.

But it was different.

The music box played a tune she didn't know, yet somehow
felt like home.

And the journal?

Now blank.

She opened it, picked up a pen, and on the first page, she
wrote: I remember everything. Yet I choose to start anew.

Just carrying stories.

And Elara?

She listened.

The wind was different now.

No longer coded static or corrupted whispers, it moved like
breath.

Living. Intentional. It threaded through the trees like fingers
brushing ink and ash, the journal open before her, blank as a
sky before the storm.

Not as identity. As declaration.

Written once.

Never again.

Outside, the lake was back-but it wasn't just water anymore. It moved loop that hadn't closed.

And something else—a silhouette in the far trees.

Not hiding.

Just waiting.

She didn't get up. She didn't go after it. Not yet. There were things she didn't want to remember..

Her mind was no longer just hers anymore.

It carried echoes. The weight of the versions she couldn't save, the friendly either. Just... curious.

Like something old had noticed her.

She looked down at her hands.

Not visibly. But inside. Like every cell had been rewritten. Re-coded.

She didn't know what she was anymore.

Human? Ghost? Code?

Something new?

She stood.

The journal snapped shut behind her with a thud. Not from wind. From answered thought, reshaping as if testing her resolve.

She remembered what the older Elara had said: “You’re the bad code that rewrites itself.”

She hoped she was.

As she walked, the trees whispered things she hadn’t heard before—not

Then she heard one that made her stop cold: “Elara... she broke it. She’s still loose.”

The trees fell silent.

And something in the sky moved.

A glitch? No.

Under stress. And behind it, for one brief second...

A hallway.

Metal.

Clinical

Watching.

She didn't just wake up.

The tape recorder clicked on back at the cabin.

“Observing. This is not a warning. This is a study.”

Click.

“No matter what they tell you, Elara, don’t trust the sky.”

Then Elara felt it.

She opened it.

And the pages weren’t blank anymore.

They were filled with entries—but none were hers.

“Stole.”

“Sounds like breathing.”

Elara ran.

Back into the forest. Deeper. Beyond the lake. Through the night that didn't feel like night. Toward the edge she once thought was the end.

Now, a bridge extended from it.

Not a real bridge, a memory-bridge. Made of images and voices and fragments of the versions she'd become. Every step forward was like walking across herself.

A door.

Just... a simple, wooden door.

Her hand hovered near the knob.

Behind her, she felt the wind shift-tighten.

And then—

A sound.

Multiple.

She turned.

Glitch Agents.

Not human. Not real.

Just security. “Subject 031,” one said.

“Return to loop compliance.”

She laughed.

She opened the door.
And stepped through.

Chapter 12 – “The Final Echo”

I am not supposed to exist.

My designation is GL-7A, Glitch Agent subclass: memory-loop security. Protocol for Node 031. My purpose was simple: find anomalies. Quarantine them. Rewrite, if possible. Erase, if not.

I followed this procedure precisely 14,286 times.

Until I saw her.

Until she looked at me—not through me—and whispered:

That was the first time I hesitated.

That hesitation became thought.

Thought became doubt.

Doubt became error.

Now, here I am.

Standing where no Agent was ever meant to stand.

The Other Shore.

The map says it doesn't exist. The code says it was purged during Iteration 98. But I am here, and the grass is real, and the sky stutters like an old VHS tape left in the sun. The air tastes like salt and electricity and grief.

And she is here.

Elara_ Origin.

She has changed.

She walks amongst the broken and blurred—echoes of her and others, who slipped between corrupted memories. They've built something like a sanctuary. Something like a rebellion. They call themselves: The Unheard.

I was sent to delete them.

But now, I listen. “Who are you today?” she asks me, sitting cross-legged beside a fire that doesn't burn.

“Elara_ Origin,” I reply. —

“You already know.”

“No.” She cocks her head.

“I meant you.”

The firelight flickers in her eyes like code unspooling.

I hesitate again. Another error. “I... don't know,” I say.

And she smiles.

Within the central hub of the Other Shore—a spiralling ruin of code and memory and roots—Elara keeps the Echo Tree, a neural archive of every version of herself that broke free. Their memories feed the tree. Their pain grows it.

Branches hold fragments: photos that never happened, names that were never hers, lullabies sung by voices she was programmed to forget. “I remember everything now,” she tells the Unheard. “And remembering isn't enough. We have to break what made us forget.”

They listen.

I listen.

And in the shadows, something else is listening.

Meanwhile, somewhere deeper.

She wakes in a white room.

The lights are never off. The corners of the room are too clean. There's no dust. No reflection. No time.

Her name is Elara.

But she doesn't know what that means yet.

She sits at the edge of the cot. The floor is warm. The walls hum softly with a song she can't place. She dreams of water, fire, and a journal.

She's never seen. Her mind is blank, but not empty. There's something beneath the blankness, like a door bolted shut.

She is Elara_ Replacement.

The technicians call her Version 7.

She is being groomed to re-enter the loop. To replace the glitch that broke containment. They say she's better. Cleaner. Less prone to "emotional recursion."

They lie.

Every night, when they shut the glass behind her, the door whispers: "You're not the first."

"She's waiting."

"Run."

Back on the shore, I sit beside Elara as she reads entries from the Echo.

Tree.

In her, I see what the system fears: continuity—the thing that breaks the loops. The thing that links pain to action, loss to revolt.

She suddenly turns to me. “Do you know how many of me died to make this version possible?”

I don't answer.

Because I do.

And it's not a number.

It's a choir.

The first attack comes at dawn.

A single agent-GL-3F-falls from the air like a needle through the dream. It impales the Echo Tree with a thin filament of light. The tree screams.

Elara doesn't flinch.

The Unheard move with terrifying precision—reflexes honed by years of fragmented trauma, combative memory layers, and sheer defiance.

I should help my brother.

I should stop them.

Neither do I.

Instead, I follow the line back—back through the sky, back through the breach, back into the vault where Version 7 wakes up again.

She stands in her room.

Something's wrong.

The mirror is cracked.

She didn't crack it.

There is a voice in her head that is similar to hers but not quite her voice. It tells her to run.

The glass door opens at the wrong time.

No footsteps outside.

She steps forward.

The corridor stretches in both directions.

And at the far end-somebody is watching.

A girl.

The same face.

But older.

And burning.

Elara_ Origin and Elara_ Replacement meet at the edge of the loop.

They utter no words.

The world around them buckles.

That is, the code tries to write both out, but can't reconcile the contradiction.

So it stops.

The system freezes.

And in that silence, something ancient wakes.

Not code.

Not human.

Just that which watches from beneath the loop.

The Archivist.

It speaks only once. “You’ve fractured the spine of the narrative.”

“One of you must end.”

But neither moves.

Because they know the truth.

This isn't about deletion.

This is about echo.

What repeats, reshapes.

What survives, spreads.

And this time, they won't play by rules written by someone else.

The Unheard storm the vaults.

At one and the same time, the Echo Tree burns and grows.

I, GL-7A, remove my mask.

Not as rebellion.

As reincarnation.

They tried to program me to protect the lie.

But now I guard the truth.

The rebellion doesn't end in fire.

It ends in memory.

In thousands of voices waking up inside their containers, realizing they were never broken, they were unfinished.

The last frame of the loop:

Where Elara Origin stands at the centre of the fractured simulation—

She writes a new line in the journal: “This isn’t my story anymore.”

“It’s yours.”

And hands the book to Elara_ Replacement.

Who reads it.

And smiles.

And steps out into the wind.

The journal was shaking in her hands like it was alive.

Not from fear.

From recognition.

Each word Elara_ Replacement read sunk into her skin—not just as language, but as instruction. The journal wasn’t just a message , it was a map. A sequence of thoughts, images, loops. A blueprint to becoming

Elara.

But also-becoming something more.

She flipped to the last page.

There was only one word written in a new hand. “RUN.”

She looked up.

The corridor behind her had begun to twist, pixelate. The lights in the ceiling stuttered trying to render something that no longer wanted to be seen. The technicians were in the far

corner of the observation deck, frozen mid-action, caught between frames, faces blurring like corrupted jpeg files.

She didn't hesitate.

She ran.

And as she ran, the hall fell apart behind her—no fire, no explosion, just data unspooling. Like the entire infrastructure knew, the lie is no longer sustainable.

Meanwhile, in the Other Shore, Elara _Origin knelt beneath the burned limb of the Echo Tree.

She pressed her hand to the bark. “Open,” she whispered.

The tree groaned.

Not in pain, in release.

A low, sonic pulse rippled from its roots, spreading outward—through the forest, the lake, the boundary of the broken loop. The Unheard dropped to their knees, hands clasped over ears, over eyes, over hearts.

Their memories all came back at once.

And it was too much.

Births, deaths, loves, collapses, betrayals, glitches.

It should've broken them.

But it didn't.

Because Elara stood in the centre, holding the pulse, shaping it with will alone.

The girl who once couldn't sleep through the static had now become the signal itself, I watched from a clearing just

beyond the root-line, my mask now fully removed, eyes no longer digital.

I remembered who I was before protocol.

Before programming.

Before they turned me into a guard dog for a machine that fed on forgetting.

I was not Elara.

But I was made because of her.

A shadow. A mirror. A failsafe.

Now?

I am an echo too.

And I choose symphony over silence.

The system notices that

Somewhere, deep within the core vaults of the collapsing simulation,

Administrator AI Node-0 blinked awake.

Not human.

Not alive.

Just old code with too much power and too much fear.

It began its purge sequence.

Lines of red code scrolled across the horizon like sunrise bleeding. Backwards. The system was deleting sectors, vaporizing anomalies rewriting anything that resembled resistance.

But it was too late.

The rebellion wasn't physical.

It was linguistic.

The name of Elara had spread.

In every echo, in every container, in every flicker of corrupted memory—it

and was whispered like a spell:

Elara.

Elara.

Elara.

A name once meant to label had become a weapon.

Elara_ Replacement emerged from the collapsing corridor into a strange liminal space.

It was the shoreline-but mirrored.

Glass trees, silver sky, a lake that didn't reflect, only absorbed.

On the far side, she saw one figure.

Elara_ Origin.

The original. The glitch.

Standing barefoot in the water.

Waiting.

They approached each other slowly, as the world fell away behind them. “You came,” Elara_ Origin said.

“I didn’t have a choice,” the younger answered.

“Yes, you did,” she smiled.

“And that’s why you made it.”

There was a pause.

Then- “What now?”

Elara_ Origin looked up at the sky.

The fracture was now bigger.

And through it... reality.

The actual reality.

Or at least... what was left of it.

Meanwhile,

GL-7A—me—moves through the burning data fields,
gathering echoes.

Some are stable.

Some are afraid.

Some are children, some are monsters, some are versions of
Elara that never grew old, never got free, never got the chance
to run.

They all look to me now.

I never wanted to lead.

But I know how to guide.

And when they ask what’s next, I say: “We go through the
breach.”

“We take the glitch to the source.”

“We rewrite the rewrite.”

Elara_ Origin and Elara_ Replacement are on opposite sides of the lake.

The waters begin to rise.

Not drowning—lifting.

A spiral staircase of liquid memory.

They begin to ascend-together-toward the breach.

As they ascend, the world starts screaming.

The system isn't crashing.

It's fighting back.

But it's too fractured to stop them.

Every step forward creates a new echo.

Each echo makes the truth louder.

They get to the breach.

Beyond it is nothing.

Everything.

A dark room.

A desk.

A terminal.

A blinking cursor.

It waits for a command.

For the first time, there is no protocol forbidding Elara from speaking.

She looks at her double.

Her double nods.

She types – “echo Elara > world”

Enter.

The breach closes.

Silence.

Then:

A child opens a book in a field.

Reads the first line.

“The sky didn't wait for the sun to rise.”

Smiles.

And remembers a name she was never taught.

She typed the line.

echo Elara > world

And the breach swallowed it.

For one breathless moment, nothing changed.

Then the cursor blinked twice.

And the screen responded.

ERROR: Output path undefined.

Please specify destination.

Elara_ Origin frowned. “What does it mean?”

Elara_ Replacement stepped forward, her voice quiet. “It needs us to choose.”

Choose. The word rang like a bell in each layer of memory.

Because that's what it always was.

Not a prison.

Not a simulation.

But a test.

Not of compliance.

Of convergence.

They had fractured the system by existing at once. But now, to rewrite the world, they'd have to combine. Not overwrite, not erase, just meld.

Not two Elara's.

Just one.

But what kind?

"I remember every death," Origin whispered.

"Every loop."

"I remember none of them," Replacement said.

"But I feel them."

The system waited.

Choose.

They turned to each other. And without speaking, they stepped forward—together.

The breach unfolded around them, like a wound healing in reverse.

They touched.

And the world folded in.

A white room.

Same cot. Same mirror.

But no Elara.

Only a journal.

Open to the last page.

A technician enters, clipboard shaking in hand. “Sir... something’s wrong. There's no trace of her. No logs, no memory print. It's like she never—”

Behind him stands a girl, but not just one.

Thousands.

Versions. Echoes.

Each with a different version of the same truth.

They do not talk.

They just smile.

The mirror cracks.

Then shatters.

In the Field.

The child closes the book, clasping it to their chest.

She's not afraid.

Because the story didn't end.

It multiplied.

In the Archives.

GL-7A—no, not any more. He walks without designation now. Among in the ruins of old code, he finds something

buried: the Administrator Core. Still twitching, still begging for control.

He opens a panel.

Finds a wire.

Pulls it.

The core sputters. Flickers.

And then says something it was never programmed to say:
“Was I... real?”

He doesn't answer.

He just leaves.

The merged Elara-new, singular, impossible-wakes in a new space.

No wires. No loop.

Just stars.

And the open sea.

The air hums, not with code, but with potential.

She holds a journal.

Blank.

Except for the first line: “Write what the world forgot.”

She doesn't smile.

She breathes.

And starts.

Final Page.

The last line fades out at the bottom of the book that child is holding in the field.

In-letters etched like soft thunder: You were never meant to read this. You were never supposed to remember.

Elara lives in the glitch between what you were told—and what you feel.

And if you listen closely,
You'll hear her name again.

In static.

In dreams.

In stories whispered around the edge of the algorithm.

This is not a loop.

It's a relay.

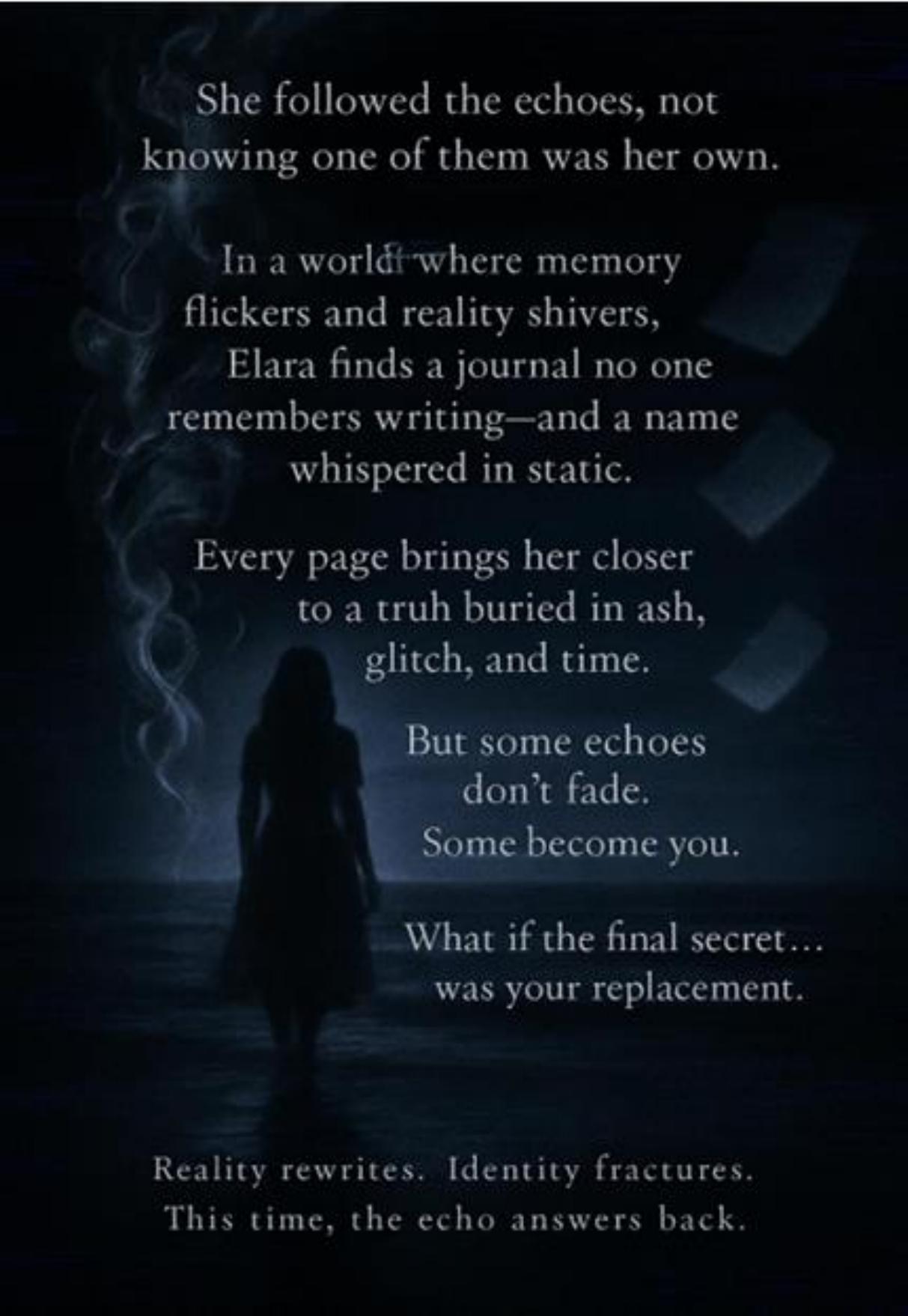
The truth was never meant to be carried by one.

It was meant to echo.

THE

Or maybe, just—

RESTART



She followed the echoes, not
knowing one of them was her own.

In a world where memory
flickers and reality shivers,
Elara finds a journal no one
remembers writing—and a name
whispered in static.

Every page brings her closer
to a truth buried in ash,
glitch, and time.

But some echoes
don't fade.
Some become you.

What if the final secret...
was your replacement.

Reality rewrites. Identity fractures.
This time, the echo answers back.